

A Tool for Population Management: The Release Level Matrix

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The Los Angeles County Sheriffs Department operates the eight custody facilities in the county's jail system. These facilities have a average daily inmate population of 20,868. The department manages the Custody Division with 3,434 employees and a \$340 million annual budget.

The Sheriff's Department has been under a long-standing federal court order to limit the size of the inmate population in each county jail. The court gave the Sheriff's Department broad authority to manage the jail population based on available bed space. More recently, the threat of budget reductions and the closing of some facilities have influenced the county's jail population management strategy.

The department's commitment to provide tranquility and safety in our communities has been undermined by inadequate funding and crowded jail conditions. Historically, these factors have forced the department to manage inmate populations by attempting to affect inmates' length of stay through such methods as

early release credits, percentage release, and citation release.

In response to the current fiscal crisis, the department has re-examined these inmate population control strategies and devised new ones. Perhaps the most significant new strategy is the "release level matrix" (RLM), which sorts inmates into manageable and identifiable release levels by assigning numerical values in five evaluation categories. The result reflects a "most-to-least" acceptable order for re-introducing inmates into the community.

How the Release Level Matrix Works

To institute the release matrix system, the Custody Division first evaluated the entire inmate population by using a series of "filters" that sorted prisoners into identifiable groups. These initial filters sorted inmates into the following groups:

- Male and female;
- Misdemeanants, felons, and those with a combination of misdemeanor and felony charges; and
- Sentenced, unsentenced, and partially sentenced inmates.

Using these initial categories, the Custody Division then experimented with various groupings to determine

the applicability of additional filters. Through this process, they arrived at the final categories that are now used to sort inmates for release eligibility:

Category	Point values
Gender	-
Charge type/level:	
Misdemeanor	5
Felony	9
Sentence status (Sentenced, partially sentenced, or unsentenced)	-
Security level	0 to 9
Current charge(s)	0 to 9
Bail amount	0 to 9
Percent of sentence completed	0 to 9

Each inmate is given a score in the five categories with numerical values (see above) and then sorted in terms of the other categories. Inmates with "special handles," "holds," or those associated with an "unusual occurrence" arrest are also placed in a special category. After all sorting is completed and point values totalled, each inmate is assigned an overall raw score. Inmates are listed in ascending order of their scores, and the result is the release level matrix, which ranks all inmates for potential release.

At the top of the matrix are inmates with the lowest scores-those who are most acceptable for release.

These are inmates with the lowest security level, lowest bail, least heinous charge(s), and with the greatest portion of any sentence completed. Inmates at the opposite end of the matrix are those with the highest security level, highest bail, most heinous charge(s), and smallest portion of sentence completed.

Using the Matrix

The release level matrix is used to guide an orderly and progressive release of inmates when needed to control inmate populations or to close facilities. It is intended to be a fair and equitable method of identifying inmates eligible for release and to result in the least possible impact to the community.

As a result of a current budget crisis and a continued increase in the inmate population, the Custody Division has been integrating the release level matrix with other existing release mechanisms. Currently being used system-wide, the matrix is used in concert with the citation release and percentage release programs. The Division has implemented the matrix system slowly and cautiously, as staff and administration accustom themselves to new procedures and reports.

The RLM was the primary release procedure used to effect the closure of the Mira Loma Facility in August 1993. This facility was selected for closure because the resulting release or reassignment of its inmates would have the least

impact on the Custody Division. Closing this facility also provided the inmate population management staff the opportunity to evaluate the RLM mechanism as applied to the process of releasing and/or reassigning inmates and closing a facility.

Continuing Population Management Efforts

Although the release level matrix provides a tool for the long-term management of inmate populations, the populations also require constant monitoring. Recognizing the need to remain proactive to changing population patterns, the Sheriff's Department is developing a full-time population management staff. Their responsibilities will include:

- Analyzing current and historical data on inmate population trends, making projections of those trends, and identifying potential problems;
- Comparing actual inmate populations with actual space availability;
- Making recommendations for shifting inmate populations within Custody Division facilities; and

- Identifying segments of the inmate population to target for release when necessary.

By accessing current and historical records and automated reports, the population management staff will monitor and control inmate populations on a continual basis.

As the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department prepares for the possible closure of additional jail facilities and the reduction of the jail population, the Custody Division will continue to revise its release level matrix technique to meet the ever-changing needs of a large custody management system and the communities it serves.

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